

## Extraordinary singing makes this 'Tosca' remarkable

By John Farrell Correspondent

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"Tosca" is one of the most popular operas in the repertory. It is also one of the most challenging, requiring the services of a soprano of great power and extraordinary acting ability, a tenor ditto, and a bass-baritone likewise.

If that were all, "Tosca" would be, relatively speaking, a breeze.

But it also requires a slew of secondary characters, a dozen or so tertiary performers, and the services of an orchestra as well.

So when Intimate Opera's dauntless Founder Wendy Kikkert decided to produce "Tosca" this season, she was either a little crazy or was confident that she could pull it off. She had already mounted Verdi's "La Traviata" two years ago, and "La Tragedie de Carmen" by Bizet last year, so perhaps her courage was based on fact.

From the evidence at the first regular performance at Packard Hall in Duarte Saturday afternoon, we can see that she definitely isn't crazy. Intimate Opera's "Tosca" was a fine fulfilling performance, with a remarkable and effective cast.

This "Tosca" isn't perfect, but from Tracy Saliefendic's warm and very believable Floria Tosca to Kristof Van Gryspeer and his very effective 15-piece orchestra, it was an afternoon to relish. There are two more performances, tonight and Sunday afternoon, so you have a chance to experience it.

Mind you, this is still opera on the cheap. Van Gryspeer's orchestra was generally fine, but just didn't have the strength (or the orchestral bells) to make the opening of the third act quite what it might be. Sets were minimal, although effective, and Packard Hall has the sight lines of the church meeting hall it is when opera isn't there.

But for all the disadvantages, there was no doubt that serious performers and a well-directed chorus were doing a fine job.

Saliefendic's Tosca was very much the diva in one of opera's truly diva-like roles. She had plenty of voice, and sang with a plangent, rich tone, moving emotionally from jealousy to desperation, then anger and determination all the way to the final death scene. It was a star turn, and she was every inch the star, in a gorgeous empire-waist gown.

Her lover, Mario Cavaradossi, was sung with ardor and passion by Scott Priest, who was strikingly handsome besides. It wasn't a careful performance; Priest took alarming chances, and provided sorrowful reflection in lovely,

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memorable duets with Saliefendic.

Baron Scarpia, sung by Sang Wook Kwon, seemed almost gleeful with his unbridled lust and untrammelled power. Scarpia is a political animal of the fiercest kind. Because this opera was sung in English, the audience got the full meaning of Scarpia's violently cruel animal passions. When Tosca gives him "Tosca's kiss" with a stolen table knife, there was no sympathy for the bad baron.

Angelotti, the escaped prisoner who causes the terrible tragedy (all the principals die in the opera) was effectively sung by Herve Blanquart. Andrew Scott made a menacing Spoletta, Nicholas Selton a frightening jailer, and Katherine Scheaffer was a brief delight as the shepherd boy. E. Scott Levin was a very funny priest.

Karen Cooksey conducted the large chorus with a fine result (though it was a bit amusing to see five young women dressed in widow's weeds, sitting on an off-stage couch before the performance, all huddled over brightly lit phones, happily texting away.)



The performance was better than anyone might have expected; we can't wait to see what Kikkert decides to do next. Wait, though; the "Ring" is already spoken for.

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